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2015-9

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Recommended Citation

Maher, E. (2015) Sanctity in the Midst of Mediocrity : Graham Greene's Whiskey Priest in *Spirituality*, Vol. 21, September-October 2015, no. 122, pp311-314.

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'Sanctity in the Midst of Mediocrity'

Graham Greene's Whiskey Priest

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Galway to Cloyne, and Beyond: Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism.

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The English novelist and convert to Catholicism, Graham Greene (1904-1991), saw the priest as being core to his literary portrayal of Catholicism. *The Power and the Glory* (1940), published four years after Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*, is set in a Latin American country, most probably Mexico, which Greene visited in 1938. In the novel, his whiskey priest, one of the last surviving clerics in a country where the Communist leadership have outlawed religion, struggles with alcoholism and with his many human weaknesses. Having fathered a child with his former housekeeper and given much scandal to his sacred calling, this priest has the additional burden of being forced to move around the country in order to escape arrest and execution. Norman Sherry, Greene's biographer, supplies the following insight about the writer's desire to visit the Latin American country:

Mexico drew him because it had been, and to some extent still was, a battlefield where war was waged between a form of paganism and Christianity – the fiercest and most successful persecution of the Roman Catholic religion anywhere since the reign of Elizabeth I of England. By the time Greene arrived in Mexico the religious persecution was to all intents and purposes over, but the tradition of martyrdom was still there. One might say that in Mexico he was seeking martyrs and persecutors, but however much he brought out of Mexico, he took a lot into it.¹

These lines provide an excellent summary of the Mexico-inspired novel, which pits a Communist atheist lieutenant intent on suppressing religion against an apparently hapless priest, who, it could be said, becomes a martyr almost by default. It is the classic conflict between secularism and religiosity, between tradition and modernity, with the usual fault lines that appear in such situations. What the lieutenant finds most distasteful about Catholicism is the way in which it prevented his fellow countrymen from rising out of the mire of poverty and ignorance in which they found themselves:

[...] he remembered the smell of incense in the churches of his boyhood, the candles and the laciness and the self-esteem, the immense demands made from the altar steps by men who didn't know the meaning of sacrifice. The old peasants knelt there before the holy images with their arms held out in the attitude of the cross: tired by the long day's labour in the plantations, they squeezed out a further mortification. And the priest came round with the collection box taking their centavos, abusing them for their small

1. Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, Volume 1: 1904-1939 (London: Pemlico, 2004 [1989]), p.690

2. Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), pp.22-23. All references will be to this edition, with the page number in brackets.

comforting sins, and sacrificing nothing at all in return – except a little sexual indulgence.²

In order for this type of exploitation to be defeated, the zealous policeman sets about ensuring there are no priests left alive in his country. What he doesn't understand fully is the extent to which he and his adversary share some of the same aversion for a religion where everything has a price – confession, absolution, Mass, spiritual reassurance – and where people know or care little about the basis of their faith. When the peasants refuse to betray the priest, they do so out of a superstitious belief that to do so would ensure their eternal damnation. Their loyalty does not prevent them from trying to pay as little as they can for the services the priest provides. On many occasions, the whiskey priest wonders if his ministry is achieving anything at all, if superstition and ignorance are the only things that prevent the people from handing him over to the authorities. He is self-aware enough to know that he is unworthy of his calling: 'He was a bad priest, he knew it. They had a word for his kind—a whiskey priest, but every failure dropped out of sight and mind: somewhere they accumulated in secret—the rubble of his failures' (60). There is a part of him that would love to be caught, but it is his duty to avoid arrest so that he can minister to the few remaining Catholics in the country. Whereas Bernanos' priest is unduly harsh in his assessment of his faults, Greene's is not. He is a cowardly drunkard with a lascivious past and even his own daughter wants to have nothing to do with him, which prompts him to utter the following prayer: 'O God give me any kind of death—without contrition, in a state of sin—only save this child'. (82) He can see the mark of the world in this girl, the fruit of his loins, of his sinfulness, and he knows her future is going to be perilous on many levels.

In his own way, the lieutenant is a disillusioned mystic who just replaces one form of fanaticism with another: 'It infuriated him to think that there were still people in the state who believed in a loving and merciful God. These are mystics who are said to have experienced God directly. He was a mystic, too, and what he had experienced was vacancy—a complete certainty in the existence of a dying, cooling world, of human beings who had evolved from animals for no purpose at all. He knew' (24-25). It is possible to say that the priest 'knew' the silence of God's presence in an intimate way also. The difference was that through his priestly function he sees himself as being destined to continue God's work as long as he possibly can. Some otherworldly quality appears to distinguish him from those ordinary people with whom he shares the latter days of his existence. Those who encounter him on the streets or in prison detect from his way of speaking, his demeanour, that he is not like them, that he is part of a different caste. Yet they can also see

how far he has fallen from grace and how much he craves alcohol and a return to the easy life that he once enjoyed. When the lieutenant calls on the village community where the whiskey priest has taken refuge to give him up, asking them what God has ever done for them, has He given them and their children enough to eat, they remain silent and the priest is allowed to escape. He will not always be so lucky, as he realises when he encounters the half-caste, a modern day Judas who will finally betray him for a few pieces of silver. The priest's reaction is one of revulsion when he meets this man for the first time, but then he upbraids himself with the thought: 'Christ had died for this man too: how could he pretend with his pride and lust and cowardice to be any more worthy of that death than the half-caste?' (99)

It is significant, and perhaps appropriate, that the priest is led to his ultimate destiny by a man with few redeeming qualities. The bad priest realises something approaching greatness by agreeing to return from the country to which he has escaped in order to tend to the spiritual needs of an American gangster who, the half-caste claims, requested to see a priest before his death. The priest knows he is walking into a trap and still he goes, turning his back on a comfortable life in a country where he was free from religious persecution, had clean clothes to wear and the possibility of ministering without fear of arrest. He realises that his fate is to return from whence he came. One could argue that in some ways Greene's novel is the story of the priest's unsuccessful attempts to avoid sainthood. For Greene, goodness and evil were often separated by a very thin line. Sherry reproduces the following observation made by Greene: 'The greatest saints have been men with more than a normal capacity for evil, and the most vicious men have sometimes narrowly avoided sanctity.'³ In the case of *The Power and the Glory*, one gets the impression that the priest's plainly obvious human defects are in some way subsumed by his vocation. So while he is definitely a sinner, he is nonetheless capable of remarkable acts of charity.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the way he returns to tend to the spiritual needs of the Gringo, who passes him a knife and tells him not to bother about him and to flee from the encroaching policemen. But the priest stays and whispers the words of conditional absolution in the ear of the dying criminal. He is then captured and imprisoned, as he knew he would be.

While in prison, he and the lieutenant have long conversations about religion. One has the sense that the atheist is the one looking for answers. He focuses in particularly on how one can love a God who rewards His followers so poorly. The priest replies:

I'm not as dishonest as you think I am. Why do you think I tell

... Greene's novel is the story of the priest's unsuccessful attempts to avoid sainthood.

3. Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, p.722.

people out of the pulpit that they're in danger of damnation if death catches them unawares? I'm not telling them fairy stories I don't believe myself. I don't know a thing about the mercy of God; I don't know how awful the human heart looks to Him. But I do know this—that if there's ever been a single man in this state damned, then I'll be damned too. (200)

The lieutenant cannot help being impressed by such genuine humility and demonstrates some kindness to his prisoner—he brings him brandy and treats him well during his captivity. He even goes so far as to ask the defrocked priest, Padre José, to visit the jail, with a view to hearing the whiskey priest's confession. But the latter refuses his request and so the priest is allowed to die without the comfort of the sacraments. Nevertheless, while awaiting execution, he exudes a strange sense of calm: 'He felt only immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. [...] He knew now at the end that there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint.' (210)

'...He knew now at the end that there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint.'

Certain strange happenings after the priest's death reveal the impact he had on various people. For example, a young English girl, Coral, offered him protection for a while and died shortly afterwards in tragic circumstances. Her father remarks how she was affected by this encounter: 'But the odd thing is – the way she went on afterwards – as if he'd told her things' (214). Similarly, the young boy Luis, who was constantly irritated by his mother's insistence on reading from the lives of the saints, spits at his former hero, the lieutenant, after the priest's execution. The last lines of the novel see the young boy opening the door to another priest seeking refuge in their house and kneeling to kiss the stranger's hand. Greene understood how ritual and a sense of community are highly treasured, especially among poorer people. Luis's father Juan remarks:

You don't remember the time when the Church was here. I was a bad Catholic, but it meant—well, music, lights, a place where you could sit out of this heat—and for your mother, well, there was something for her to do (51).

Without the priest, none of this is possible, which is what makes his role so unique and mysterious. Greene's presentation of the irruption of grace in the lives of his characters did not always meet with favour among certain critics who felt that a *deus ex machina* was sometimes employed in his works to redeem flawed characters like the whiskey priest. My own view is that Greene was shrewd in his handling of how grace operates and that he saw weak Catholics as sometimes benefiting from God's favour. Certainly, *The Power and the Glory* is one of the classic accounts of the life and death of a priest and is therefore an indispensable novel for this series.